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RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DJIBOUTI 000632

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, INR/AA, AND PRM/AFR
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/29/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: UNHCR REJECTS TAKING CUSTODY OF
ERITREAN MILITARY DEFECTORS/DESSERTERS

REF: DJIBOUTI 508 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: SOLANGE GARVEY, CONSULAR OFFICER. REASON: 1.4 (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Citing security issues, UNHCR has rejected a request from the Government of Djibouti to take up to 39 Eritrean military defectors/deserters to Djibouti's sole refugee camp, currently dominated by Somalis and Ethiopians. Nevertheless, UNHCR is expected to register the Eritrean defectors/deserters, and will seek immediate resettlement for those determined to be refugees. Eritrean troops abandoning their weapons and crossing the border into Djibouti precipitated the outbreak of hostilities on June 11, and thus the disposition of these defectors/deserters remains a sensitive issue. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) UNHCR Representative Ann Encontre reported that on July 25, the Government of Djibouti contacted her to hand over 36-39 Eritrean military defectors/deserters to UNHCR. (NOTE: These are likely Eritrean troops who entered Djibouti from the disputed Ras Doumeira area prior to the outbreak of June 11 hostilities. END NOTE.)

13. (C) After communicating with UNHCR Geneva, Encontre decided not to accept the Eritrean defectors/deserters from the GODJ, citing (1) registration requirements, and (2) camp security issues. She stated that the defectors/deserters needed to be screened to determine their identity and confirm whether they were truly Eritrean military defectors/deserters and not Djiboutians. Encontre asserted that in the past, the GODJ attempted to include Djiboutians among refugees seeking emergency resettlement. Encontre also said that UNHCR concerns reflect the need to ensure protection of the defectors/deserters, as their placement in Djibouti's sole existing refugee camp (which includes large numbers of Somalis and Ethiopians) could endanger them. Last but not least, Encontre stated that she feared the possibility that defectors/deserters may have been sent to Djibouti intentionally to gather information; she therefore prefers that they not be sent to the refugee camp.

14. (C) Encontre departed Djibouti for home leave on July 26 and will return on August 23. In her absence, Protection Officer and Acting Representative, Shana Kaninda, will oversee the registration process of the Eritrean defectors/deserters. If UNHCR determines that the defectors/deserters should receive refugee status, UNHCR will seek immediate resettlement for the determined refugees.

Meanwhile the defectors/deserters continue to be in the care of the GODJ.

¶5. (C) COMMENT. Charge has urged GODJ officials to transfer Eritrean defectors/deserters to the ICRC or to UNHCR, to avoid possible accusations from Asmara that Eritreans are being held by the Djiboutian government against their will. UNHCR's decision to reject Eritrean defectors/deserters is therefore disappointing, although immediate resettlement of those determined to be refugees may address these concerns. END COMMENT.
WONG